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ABSTRACT

To meet the needs of changing student populations, respond to the results of current research, and justify their continued existence financially, writing centers must expand their services to accommodate the diverse needs of various academic, business, and civic members of their surrounding communities. Besides offering peer tutoring and individualized instruction in composition and English usage, writing centers could schedule a variety of workshops at different times of the day for the surrounding community. After-school programs could be instituted for elementary and high school children in the areas of English, reading, and computer literacy. They could also be used as major settings for research in many areas and levels of education. Through close communication with special services counselors and educators, handicapped students with special needs could be helped. Finally, in addition, writing centers could act as clearinghouses for previewing and reviewing new computer software, and could be used to train educators in the evaluation and selection of reading and writing computer software. A staff member could model the software evaluation process for groups of teachers, develop a list of the most appropriate software for particular teacher needs, and help teachers develop computer-based teaching plans. (JD)

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Abstract

For the past twenty years, writing centers have played a vital role on college campuses through peer tutoring and individualized instruction in composition and English usage. However, if writing centers are indeed going to survive and justify their existences financially, they must now expand their services to meet the diverse needs of various academic, business and civic members of their surrounding communities.

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THE WRITING CENTER: A LEADER IN CHANGE AND SERVICE

When writing centers were in their infancy, settings could have been best described as idyllic. Soft classical music streamed dreamily in the background as well-trained, idealistic peer tutors gently guided eager students in the finer points of essay writing. Writing center directors drifted from tutoring scene to tutoring scene, dropping little bits of wisdom, and then floated back to their offices to fill out lab paperwork, read the latest professional journals, and reflect on the day's activities. Things ran smoothly and quietly.

Presently tutoring is still the major activity in writing centers, but there is now a noticeably new hustle and bustle in writing centers as they are beginning to respond to the demands of various audiences in their academic communities. In the November 1985 issue of The Writing Lab Newsletter, Joyce Kincaid declares that if writing centers are indeed to survive, they must expand their audiences to include all members of academic and civic communities. She believes that writing centers should be centers of literacy on and off campus, offering workshops, consulting business and civic leaders, and developing educational materials.

To meet the needs of changing student populations, to respond to the results of current research, and many times to justify a writing center's existence financially, writing centers directors and staff members must broaden their vision of the

purposes of their institutions. Instead of viewing their labs as havens of peer tutoring, writing centers should begin to serve a multitude of audiences in new and exciting ways.

Besides offering peer tutoring, writing centers could schedule a variety of workshops at different times of the day for all members of the surrounding community. Book clubs for children and adults alike could meet weekly in the writing center to discuss a favorite book. Staff members could coordinate these meetings and could offer literary insights into the text. Similarly, local famous and not-so-famous authors could be invited to discuss their latest works. Surprisingly, most authors if asked politely and with enough advance notice are delighted to visit literary guilds. Writing workshops, based on Donald Murray's model, could be established so that budding authors would have a safe space and a nonthreatening audience to respond to their works. Other workshops which would be popular with a variety of audiences would include computer classes introducing adult and child computer novices to the wonderful world of computers. Basic courses in operating systems, word processing, computer languages and computer-aided instruction would attract hordes of people who are now inundated with incomplete information concerning computers. Finally, writing centers could provide comfortable settings for children's story-telling hours and adult folklore seminars.

During slack hours, writing centers can also sponsor enrichment programs for various community members. After-school programs could be scheduled for elementary and high school-aged children in the areas of English, Reading and computer literacy. Especially in summer months when enrollment drops drastically, the center could be used for intensive orientation programs for incoming freshmen and transferring college students. Enrichment program, funded by local and federal grants, could be offered in conjunction with education courses for elementary and high school teachers and administrators. In a laboratory setting, teachers could receive training in peer tutoring, selection of computer software, and instruction in computer programming. Certainly major computer companies such as I.B.M. and Apple who are dependent on educators' support would be willing to underwrite staffing and materials.

Likewise throughout the school year, model writing centers could be designated as clearinghouses for previewing and reviewing new computer software. Staff members could establish a networking system with a newsletter notifying members of exciting and valuable software. Frequent seminars on software acquisition and selection could be held in the writing center so that unnecessary duplication of materials between agencies and sometimes within agencies would not occur.

The writing center could also be used as a major setting for research in many areas and levels of education. Varied and

multiple short and long-term research projects could be initiated and monitored there. Case studies, experimental designs, longitudinal studies, and ethnographic descriptions could coexist and support each other in such a setting. Studies investigating peer tutoring, collaborative learning, writing practices, computer-aided instruction, composing with computers, personality types, and students' attitudes toward writing need to be sponsored by writing center staffs. So too, the writing center is a perfect place for writing, testing and evaluating curriculum materials.

More and more handicapped students with special needs are visiting writing centers. Through close communication with special services counselors and educators, frank discussions with the students themselves, research, and the acquisition of special materials and equipment, the writing center can serve a whole spectrum of needs while assisting physically handicapped students and learning disabled students. Peer tutoring is especially effective with handicapped students. Peer tutors can read to the visually-impaired, take notes for the hearing-deficient, conduct library research for the physically disabled and tutor patiently the learning disabled. In addition, special equipment can be housed in the writing center. The Kurzweil Reader, which is extremely popular with visually-impaired students, converts ordinary printed material into high quality, full-word synthetic speech. The Kurzweil can also be used as a talking calculator

and as a full-word spoken output computer terminal. This machine is easy to use after just a few hours of familiarization with its electronic voice and controls. To use, printed material is placed face down on the glass surface on the scanner and a separate, hand-sized control panel is then activated by the user which causes the reading machine to automatically locate the first line of text and begin scanning the page, so that within seconds an electronic voice is heard reading the material.

Another appropriate tool for handicapped students is the MCS's Cranmer-Perkins Brailier which combines the familiar Perkins' keyboard with advanced computer technology. With this program, students type their work on the computer and their work is then translated into braille. Students can then proofread their braille copies and revise their writing. After revisions, students can print two hard copies of their writing: one in braille and one in computer type. This brailier can also be interfaced with mainframe computers in university's computer centers or can be connected to the library computer through the use of a modem.

A final and vital role of the writing center is to train educators in the evaluation and selection of reading and writing computer software. Training programs should be developed to help teachers acquire the necessary skills to use available computer resources and to select appropriate software for their schools. Virginia Modla in her 1985 presentation to the College Reading

Association emphasized that there are several prerequisite skills that teachers need to acquire when evaluating reading and writing software and recommends the following procedures: The first skill is to secure and use effectively a software evaluation form. In the writing center, a staff member can model the evaluation process using a monitor to demonstrate the computer software program to a group of teachers. Evaluation forms can be distributed to the class, and the model evaluator can begin evaluating the software packages aloud to the class. The instructor should define important computer terms and point out both the strong and the weak points of each package. Next, class members could practice evaluation form. After finishing their evaluations of a particular package, teachers could work in small groups comparing their reactions and evaluations. This training should continue until teachers feel confident to use the evaluation forms on their own.

The second skill for evaluation and selecting software is the knowledge of available computer software resources. Writing center staff members could prepare a list of the "best" software in particular fields for certain age group students. Working hand-in-hand with teachers, the writing center staff could develop a list of published software and could start a software file for future reference. Teachers could then visit the writing center to peruse this file and could preview software programs donated by local and national software firms.

Once teachers have learned how to locate programs, they should learn how to review them effectively. Janice Flake in her 1985 book Fundamentals of Computer Education suggests the following procedures for reviewing software:

1. Load and run the program briefly to become familiar with its flow.
2. Execute the program as a serious successful student would.
3. Execute the program as an unsuccessful student would to test how it handles errors. Make incorrect responses, and spelling and typing errors to test how it handles them.
4. Complete an evaluation form which should include an overall discussion of the program's strengths and weaknesses, and an recommendation of the program.

Finally, the writing center can help teachers with the last prerequisite skill: a good understanding concerning reading and writing skills. When learning how to evaluate software, teachers should also study how to plan and develop reading and writing units. Writing center staff members can help teachers develop these units to begin first with simple concepts and then proceed to more complex and abstract ones. These prerequisite skills for selecting and evaluating reading and writing software may at first appear difficult, tiresome and time-consuming, but their mastery will enable teachers to select only the highest quality software for their students and their institutions.

All of these programs can bring positive support and future financial opportunities to a writing center. As a result, mutual cooperation between academic, community and business groups can be planted and nurtured for new projects and expansion.